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Wheelchair-bound cadet tackles challenges of ROTC and life

By Sean Sedam

Staff Writer

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When Ryan Walsh wants to get the attention of his teachers at Col. Zadok Magruder High School, he raises a small American flag he holds in his hand.



Susan Whitney/The Gazette

Ryan Walsh, a freshman at Col. Zadok Magruder High School in Derwood, was recently promoted to corporal in the school's ROTC program. Walsh joined the ROTC despite that he is in a wheelchair.

It isn't due to the surge in patriotism sweeping the nation, though he has plenty of that. The ROTC cadet was raising the flag well before Sept. 11 because he can't raise his arms above his shoulders.

The flag is another way Walsh has found to live the life of a typical high school student when he is anything but.

He has never stood or walked and has been in and out of Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore since age 4. The closest diagnosis doctors can come up with is congenital

muscular dystrophy, but they really have no clue what has confined the 14-year-old to a wheelchair since birth.

Despite his physical limitations Walsh is flourishing as a freshman class senator in the Student Government Association and member of the school's Army ROTC unit.

He tackles the busy schedule of a high school freshman the way he tackles everyday life: with a positive attitude and a will to do things on his own terms.

Ryan has always found a way to do anything he wanted to do, said his mother, Tricia Walsh. As for the fact that he's in a wheelchair, "he doesn't give it a second thought" and finds his classmates take the same attitude, she said.

Ryan's radiant smile reflects that positive attitude. A head of red hair and eyes shining from behind his wire-rimmed glasses strike people meeting him for the first time. The last thing that might come to mind is that he is in a wheelchair.

So when Ryan decided he wanted to try ROTC, he went for it.

"Since I'm not going to be able to do it as a career, this is my military career," he said.

In his 16-year involvement with the ROTC, Col. Leonard Whiteside has had several disabled cadets, including one who was deaf, but never one in a wheelchair.

When Whiteside and Sgt. Maj. John Ohmer learned that Ryan would be in their program they wondered if they would have to devote additional time to accommodate Ryan.

"That hasn't been the case," Ohmer said. "Ryan's gone above and beyond the other kids that aren't handicapped."

During a fund-raiser for the ROTC program, in which cadets sold cheese, sausage and candles to support class activities such as the military ball, Ryan sold 167 items when his classmates sold 30 to 40, Ohmer said.

Because of Ryan's efforts his squad will wear yellow cords on their uniforms to signify their accomplishment as the No. 1 selling squad during the fund-raiser. Ryan has been promoted to corporal.

While much of the ROTC program is similar to a social studies class, with instruction in military science, history and culture, cadets come to school in uniform each Thursday, have monthly uniform inspections and perform marching drills.

Ryan is able to fall into formation with his fellow cadets and perform some marching maneuvers while he moves along with his platoon in his mechanical chair. He is also able to practice giving commands to other cadets, a big part of the leadership skills learned in ROTC.

His ability to perform as part of his platoon has gained Ryan the acceptance of his fellow cadets.

"In the beginning it was kind of difficult because they didn't know how it was or how I would do it," he said. "But now they're fine with it."

Whiteside said that having Ryan in the program has already been a positive experience.

"He's been a tremendous asset to us," Whiteside said. "Just by having him in the program we appreciate that there are some terrific kids and moms and dads in this world."

Whiteside said that while he's only known the Walshes for a month, he can tell that Ryan gets his positive attitude from Tricia, an exercise physiologist.

"She's more energetic," Whiteside said. "I asked her 'You aren't on Ritalin are you?' ... But that's probably a virtue in light of the requirements she has with Ryan."

As for the future, Ryan sees unlimited possibilities. He aspires to be a film director, a doctor, a lawyer or a broadcast journalist.

But in the short term he's just trying to master the voice-activated word-processor on the laptop he does his schoolwork on. Right now he's getting to know the system but is having trouble with it recognizing his voice.

"I have to scream into it and then it does the wrong thing," he said.

Ryan had a 3.8 grade point average at Forest Oak Middle School. He's now taking on high school classes and all the homework that comes with them despite the fact that just turning a page presents a challenge. His work ethic seems well suited for the military.

"I just try real hard," Ryan said. "I come home, do my homework, study."

Just like any high school student.